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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the concept of parent involvement in the early childhood literature, and discusses the applicability of this information to the day care context. A review of the literature suggests three main goals of parent involvement programs: (1) parent education; (2) the right of parents to influence programs that affect their children; and (3) ensuring continuity between the home and the preschool setting. Differences between parent education of middle class and poor parents in poverty are cited, and caution against over-enthusiasm regarding parent education is expressed. The impact of parent influence on day care through participation on boards is discussed, and questions about the ability of parents to monitor the quality of day care service are raised. Reasons for the lack of communication between parents and day care staff are suggested. An early childhood model program based on the concept of parental empowerment is discussed. The paper concludes that the supposed need for parent involvement in day care seems to be based more on the beliefs of professionals than on empirical findings, and encourages further empirical exploration of the perceptions of parents and day care staff. A list of 67 references is provided. (BC)

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RETHINKING PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN DAY CARE

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ABSTRACT

While early childhood education programs purport to encourage parent involvement, little is known about the applicability of the concept to day care. Analysing goals such as: educating parents, ensuring continuity of care, and empowering parents and reviewing relevant research, the feasibility of parent involvement in day care is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Daycare is rapidly becoming the most common form of early childhood education. The concept of parent involvement traditionally has been considered a necessary component of a quality program. However much of the li erature looks at involvement in the preschool context rather than the day care setting, possibly rendering the conclusions invalid when applied to day care.

This paper will analyze the concept of parent involvement in the early childhood and psychological literature and will discuss the applicability of this information specifically to the day care context. A clarification of the rationale for parent involvement and a review of the literature will help to conceptualize the role of parent involvement in day care.

Defining Parent Involvement

Parent involvement has been called a "dustbin" term (Smith, 1980) meaning different things to different people. While this evokes confusion (Smith, 1980; Mayfield, 1990; Gestwicki 1987), parent involvement is repeatedly cited as a crucial aspect of quality child care (Read and Patterson, 1980; Hildebrand, 1981; Peters, Neisworth & Yawkey, 1985).

A myriad of definitions are used in the literature to define parent involvement in early childhood education. Sometimes the definition refers to the kinds of activities in which parents partake, such as volunteering or attending

functions (Berger, 1987; Gordon, 1969). Handler (1971) categorizes types of parent involvement on a continuum according to the level of power parents have. Smith (1980) adds a more subjective view relating to the "openness" of the center to making parents feel welcome and able to initiate contact. Cataldo (1987) includes all of these aspects of involvement under the classification of parent education. Morrison (1988) defines parent involvement emphasizing the process "of helping parents use their abilities to benefit themselves, their children and the early childhood program".

This article will be organized in terms of the goals of parent involvement and staff-parent relations. The theoretical assumptions underlying these goals, and evaluative research available on the strategies pertaining to the goals will be discussed.

The goals of parent involvement

A review of numerous parent involvement programs in the early childhood education literature suggests three main goals. The first goal, parent education, usually includes the transmission of attitudes, skills and knowledge to the parents by peers or professionals. The second goal relates to parents exercizing their rights to affect policies and programs that impact their children. The concept of educated consumerism (Fein, 1980) pertains to this goal. Thirdly, much of the parent involvement literature deals with the goal of maximumizing continuity between the home and the

preschool environment. Another goal that recently has emerged pertains to the empowerment of parents. The empowerment process involves interactions based on the valuing of differences, mutual respect and critical reflection, the exchange of information about resources, and facilitation of efforts at social action (Cochran, 1987).

PARENT EDCATION AS INVOLVEMENT

Parent education in the United States has a long history (Schlossman, 1976). It has been expected to have a profound impact on the lives of children (Schlossman, 1976; Fein, 1980; Brim, 1965; Gordon, 1990), families, and society at large (Brim, 1965; Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Kruger, 1973; Herwig,1982; Fein, 1980; Brim, 1965; Auerbach, 1968; Meyerhoff and White, 1986). Also cited are less complimentary (unwritten) goals of parent education programs such as imposing white middle class values on immigrants and the poor (Fein, 1980); keeping bright women happy, intellectually stimulated and at home (Schlossman, 1976); and "keeping the poor happy" (Steiner, 1976). A distinction has been made (Fein, 1980; Schlossman 1976) between middle class parent education, which was voluntary, and parent education for the poor, which was usually imposed upon the participants.

Methods of Parent Education

Middle class parent education since the 1960's has been psychotherapeutic in nature, with a basis in the work of psychologists such as Dreikurs and Soltz (1964), Ginott

(1965), and Gordon (1975), which focus on communication and behavior management. In addition, open-agenda parent education groups exist, where parents, led by a group facilitator, discuss childrearing problems and solutions, as well as child development and management. (Auerbach, 1968). While there is no overt class orientation to this kind of parent education (Auerbach, 1968) most of the studies regarding this type of parent education indicate that the participants were largely middle class (Dembo et al, 1985).

Some interesting points emerge out of the few reliable evaluative studies of the "middle class" parent education programs. First, families with specific child rearing problems or who are not middle class tend to drop out (Anchor & Thomason,1977). There is no indication that the reported positive effects on the attitudes of parents in turn impact the family dynamics or the children. Nor is there any data showing the effectiveness of the different psychological approaches behind the various parent education groups (Dembo et al, 1985; Van Wyk et al,1983).

The prime objective of most contemporary parent education programs for the poor has been to teach parents a repetoire of behaviors that would foster the children's cognitive development and to promote the kind of attitudes in parents that would likely help them to help their children. The format and methods of parent education has varied from having parents participate in a preschool setting as volunteers or paid aides to providing home visits

with instruction and modeling ways to give educational experiences to the children (Beller, 1979). Structured group programs were also developed, often centered around a toy lending library (Nimnicht et al, 1977). The expectations about the long term effectiveness of compensatory parent education programs has been high, however, there is little, or no, evidence to support this optimism.

Stevens (1978) has identified the characteristics of parent education programs that have proven to be effective as a guard against "zeal in setting unrealistic expections " onto a variety of parent programs (Stevens,1978). First of all, according to Stevens (1978), most of the programs shown to be effective were subtantially funded, and conceptualized and implemented under the direction of leaders in the field of early childhood development. Secondly, the programs were fairly intensive and extensive. Successful home visiting programs, for example, were comprised of weekly visits for a period of 18 months to two years. Objectives of the programs were clearly specified, and activities were carefully derived, pilot tested and modified. Systematic supervision of those instructing the parents, a continuous monitoring of project activities, and a careful documentation of what happens in the educational program are common characteristics of effective parent education programs (Stevens,1978).

Several authors have cautioned against overenthusism regarding parent education (Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Gordon,

1990; Brim, 1965; Stevens, 1978; Schlossman, 1976). One major concern is that it may undermine parents' confidence (Clark Stewart, 1989) and cause alienation and distress in the family (Lazar and Chapman, 1971).

It is doubtful whether the kind of parent education programs described above are feasible in the day care context. Day care centers provide a service, largely, to employed parents. The training and qualifications of day care staff vary considerably from center to center, but few could be described as highly qualified professionals. In terms of the time available to staff and parents (Ade & Hoot, 1976; Swick et al,1989; Tudor,1977), and the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, implement, and monitor parent education program, the majority of day care centers seem unlikely frameworks for formal programs of parent education. Informal parent education.

While most day cares do not carry out formal parent education some early childhood practitioners believe that daily communications with parents providing advice and knowledge constitute parent education (Hughes,1985). However, Powell (1978;1980) shows the usual staff-parent contact to be minimal and superficial with infrequent or no formal meetings at all. Parents view of staff as authorities on child rearing is another consideration. One study (Joffe,1977) shows that middle class parents generally did not view staff as authorities. The apparent low status of the profession and consequent low self esteem of its members

raises questions concerning the ability of day care staff to be educators of parents.

INVOLVEMENT AS INFLUENCE OR CONTROL

The second goal of a variety of parent involvement strategies has to do with the right of parents to control, or at least to influence policies and programs that affect their children. There is a dearth of studies indicating how parents influence programs and the consequent effect on programs, staff and children.

According to Greenblatt (1977), with the exception of the rather small number of parent cooperative nurseries, the absence of parents has been a common feature in the making of preschool policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's sensitized the nation to the ways in which citizens, especially the poor, are blocked from the major institutions of our society (Greenblatt, 1977). The predominance of white middle class professionals in education, combined with the exclusive middle class representation on boards and advisory councils led to a discrepancy between the goals, values and operations of institutions and the life circumstances of those who were the supposed beneficiaries of the service provided. The paternalistic manner in which many of the programs designed to help the poor were carried out only deepened their sense of failure and helplessness (Fein, 1980).

Giving the disadvantaged "power over policy" had three

major objectives. First, this was thought to ensure the democratic rights of parents to exercise some control at the interface of education values and different cultures (Yawkey & Bakawa-Evenson, 1975). Secondly, "parent power" would ensure that programs would be sensitive to, and meet the needs of the populations they served (Almy, 1975). Thirdly, the experience of power and control would reduce the apathy and hopelessness of poverty (Fein,1980).

A certain irony inherent in the mandated participation of the poor in the policy formulation and curriculum development of the preschool programs was noted by Gordon (1990). Children were in need of compensatory preschool programs due to parents' lack of knowledge and skills. Yet, those same parents were to be instrumental in the development of programs. Another consideration has to do with what Almy (1975) describes as class-associated differences in goal emphasis, particularly in regard to obedience, compliance and neatness. If preschool teachers are predominantly middle class, it is likely that conflicts would occur when parents are actively involved in determining program content.

Evaluation of mandated parent influence or control

The little descriptive information concerning parent participation in policy largely consists of reports of the numbers of parents involved in various types of committees (Lazar and Chapman, 1972). The only study (Shapiro, 1977) that focused specifically on the influence of parent

involvement on programs showed clearly the amount of influence was not proportionate to the number of parents involved. Attendance at meetings does not neccessarily result in influence on policy. However, when parents did in fact have influence on the programs, the programs serving lower class children seemed to have less of a child-centered approach (Shapiro, 1977). Joffe's report (published the same year) showed that black parents' involvement tended to result in a more structured program.

Studies investigating the effect on the parent of participation in decision making processes (Auerbach, 1975; Safran, 1974) show that active parents develop greater confidence in themselves, as well as a greater ability to express their ideas and feelings and to act cooperatively. Weikart (1982) indicates that the experience that Head Start parents received through participation in their local projects resulted in their being more assertive in their demands on preschool programs.

It might be pertinent to point out what might seem the obvious in relation to parents and policy making. First, not all parents are interested or can participate. Secondly, parents who are unfamiliar with the processes involved will require assistance and time to learn. They are often bewildered, not knowing what is expected of them (Auerbach, 1975). Thus, staff (particularly directors) have the choice of teaching and encouraging parents to actively participate, or they can exploit parents' relative passivity. Passive

parents would fulfill the official requirements of parent participation while not threatening staff autonomy. According to Fein (1980) the role of parent as a decision maker is likely to create uneasiness.

Informal parent influence

Parent's informal impact depends on a variety of elements that have been analyzed in terms of personal characteristics such as age, training, and experience and organizational factors. The findings are conflicting. Joffe (1977) and Corwin & Wagenaar (1976) found that more highly trained and professional staff were less likely to be influenced by parents. On the other hand, several authors (Swick & McNight, 1989; Winkelstein, 1981; Lombana, 1983) suggest that staff training seems to be linked with more openness to parents. While not studied empirically, it has been suggested that parents need to be very self confident, assertive, or aggressive in order to influence early childhood programs (Callahan, 1973). It follows that staff also need self confidence to be willing to include parents in decisions concerning policy and programing in the day care. Joffe (1977) refers to early childhood practitioners as a marginal profession, lacking the self confidence required for openness to parent influence.

The vast majority of day care programs do not have mandated parent participation as part of their policy (Gestwicki,1987). For those where such a mandate exists, terms of involvement would be specified in relation to the

number of parents required on various committees. This factor has been shown to be irrelevant in measuring the true extent of parent influence and control. The studies that report the very limited amount of time that parents spend in day care centers (Zigler, 1982; Powell, 1978; 1980) and the lack of formalized exchanges between staff and parents make it reasonable to assume that there is very little informal influence and/or control by parents on day care centers.

Parent influence through educated consumerism

It has been suggested (Fein, 1980; Bradbard & Endsley, 1980) that the one most probable way of parents exerting control over day care is by being informed, selective consumers who monitor the quality of care of their children (Fein, 1980).

The potential power of parents as consumers needs to be looked at from several perspectives. Above all, it might be noted that in both Canada (Cook et al, 1986) and the United States (Kahn & Kamerman, 1987) the demand for licenced day care far exceeds the supply. This means that parents desperate to find a licensed day care center might put up with less than optimal service fearing the lack of an alternative; furthermore, once a child is in the center, parents may be cautious about criticizing for fear that the child would bear the brunt of staff's reaction. In addition, it is necessary to consider: a) how parents seek information about centers; b) how they make their selection; c) how they monitor the service: and d) what are the implications of

leaving the "policing" of day care to the parents.

Most parents obtain information about day care from informal sources (friends, neighbours) or the yellow pages. Generally, cost, proximity to home, and "educational program" have been cited as reasons (Powell, 1983). Some parents enroll their children without visiting the center previously. More parents visit once, but few visit more than one center to compare (Bradbard & Endsley,1980). It is not clear what parents look for when they visit and what they mean when they cite "educational program" as a reason for selecting the center.

Studies that investigate monitoring and evaluating day care centers after the children have enrolled show the following: parents and staff often interpret evaluation tools differently (Walsh & Deitchman, 1980); parents have found the day care center inaccessible for monitoring purposes (Wardle,1982); and other considerations, such as the child's attachment needs and ability to make adjustments to a move, may outweigh misgivings parents may have about a center (Bradbard and Endsley, 1968). These limitations may leave the parents acting alone ineffective in influencing and/or controling day care policy and programming, whereas, groups of parents acting in unison are more likely to have an impact. One serious implication of leaving quality control in the hands of parents might be the development of a two tiered day care system, a higher quality one for parents who can differentiate between high and low quality

care, and a lower quality provision for those parents who cannot.

In summary, little is known about the feasibility and potential impact of parent influence or control of day care centers through participation on boards and advisory committees. It is also not known to what extent parents wish to or are able to fulfill such a function in day care, although there are some indications (Shimoni, Carnat & Creighton, 1989; Auerbach-Fink, 1977) that parents wish for more involvement than is presently afforded them. Finally, the concept of control or influence through educated consumerism raises questions about the willingness, ability, and desirability of parents undertaking the role of sole monitors of the quality of the services.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT; ENSURING CONTINUITY OF THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

Rationale for ensuring continuity of experience

The third goal of parent involvement to be considered in this discussion is that of ensuring continuity between the home and the preschool setting. "Consistency of care" and "continuity of care" are phrases that are found repeatedly in the professional literature. The younger the children are, the more vital this continuity or consistency is considered to be. While there is little empirical data available to directly support the importance of continuity

of experience, practitioners in the field frequently report that young children, especially those whose language skills are not yet well developed, suffer much frustration in the many transitions they have to make during the course of a day (children often have up to six different caregivers, in addition to their parents). With an increase in the number of settings the young child needs to be part of, and the number of unconnected adults that he/she has to relate to, the stress and frustration of the child are thought to increase. Secondly, when different social environments have different rules of behavior, different methods for encouraging and/or discouraging certain behaviors, this is thought to confuse the child and to cause undue stress.

Several assumptions are implicit here. The first is that, indeed, continuity of experience is important for young children. Secondly, there is an assumption that increased communication between parents and staff will result in more continuity of experience for the child. In other words, the communication would usually have to result in some action taken by the parent or staff member. There are virtually no empirical data which can be used to explore these assumptions, other than those already cited in the previous section (Powell, 1978; 1980; 1983; Kontos & Wells, 1986). Those studies indicate very little or very superficial contact between day care staff and parents.

Abundant in the literature, however, are explanations of why there might be so little communication between staff

and parents. Some relate to organizational constraints, such as the time available to both staff and parents (Ade & Hoot, 1976; Tudor, 1977). Others (Galinsky, 1988; Lurie& Newman, 1975) relate to inevitable tensions that occur between staff and parents due to the different perspective each must take ("tunnel vision" of parents who consider only the needs of their own children vs. concern for the entire group of the staff member). Finally, some authors have pointed to negative attitudes that staff have concerning the parents (Samuels, 1973; Warren, 1975; Herwig, 1982; Lombana, 1983). Staff training regarding communication with parents and the importance of parent-staff relations is often cited in the literature as a way to remedy the problems that exist between parents and staff.

In addition, the literature abounds with ideas of how staff can increase the amount of communication with parents (Gestwicki, 1987; Berger, 1978; Lane, 1975). Newsletters, notes, telephone calls and conferences are some of the methods mentioned. Upon a careful reading of the professional literature on communication with the parents, however, one can discern a common trend. Most of the literature concerns staff communications geared at informing parents. For the most part, this information is from the deficit perspective, that is, negative perceptions of child performance were a precondition for parent-staff communications (Cochran, 1987).

There is less available literature explaining how to

obtain and use information from the parents. If increased communication is expected to increase the continuity of experience for the child, it is implied in much of the professional literature that the parents are supposed to conform or adapt, rather than vice versa. As pointed out by Herrera (1988), one-way communication from the teacher to parents can alienate rather than encourage involvement.

A further question arises here concerning how much information parents want to give day care staff concerning the occurrences at home. One study (Powell, 1978) showed that whereas staff felt that family issues should be made known to the staff, many parents felt that this was not the staff's concern. Although there is, in theory, some advantage in staff knowing about changes or significant events in the child's life, it is not known how staff use the information they receive. It could be used to sensitize their responses to the children, but it could also cause stereotyped expectations, depending on the level of professionalism of the staff.

Therefore, the goal of parental involvement as a means of ensuring continuity of experience for the child seems much more one of intention than of practice. The belief in its importance can be backed up by developmental theory, but little is known about whether this in fact is a realistic expectation of both parents and day care staff.

EMPOWERMENT

Recently the concept of empowerment has begun to seep

into the early childhood literature (Powell, 1989). Rappaport (1981) explains that there are at least two requirements of an empowerment ideology. One is to learn more about how people are handling their own problems in living. The second is to make these learnings public in order that changes can be made in policies and programs so that people gain more control of their lives.

Cochran (1987) describes an early childhood model program based in the concept of parental empowerment in which the families' strengths and differences (including historical, cultural and social traditions) are respected; the parent is viewed as the one who knows more about the child than anyone outside the family; and successful child rearing is determined by the number and types of resources used by parents and not merely by personal and family characteristics. Early home visits, conducted by paraprofessionals, were designed to give recognition to the parenting role, reinforce and enrich parent-child activities already being carried out and to share information about child care and community services. In time, the program evolved to "cluster building neighborhoods" which were aimed at reducing feelings of isolation, to encouraging sharing of information and pooling of resources, to provide a forum for parents to express any needs for changes in the neighborhood, and to facilitate action in pursuing these changes.

While Cochran described the partial success of the

demonstration project, the feasibility of this model for day care warrants careful consideration. First, it is an example of a well thought out program, substantially funded and directed by highly qualified academics - similar to many of the demonstration projects which evolved during the Head Start era. Secondly, the target population of this project was low income group, rather than socio-economic mix found in most day care centers. Thirdly, one needs to question the ability of day care workers, an occupational group repeatedly described as exploited, to be part of a process of empowering another group.

CONCLUSION

The appropriateness or feasibility of the goals of parent involvement and/ or staff parent relations from the early childhood education literature to the day care context is not at all clear. It is doubtful whether the majority of day care staff have the qualifications, time, or inclination to implement formal parent education programs, nor is it clear that parents indeed are interested in or able to participate. The success of informal parent education through ongoing communication is unlikely due to the minimal contact that seems to occur between parents and staff, and questions regarding parents perception of staff as having expertise to share has not been demonstrated. Parent control or influence on day care has been questioned by professionals in terms of the possible "negative" impact on the quality of the educational program. The concept of

continuity of care has been been guided by little but "conventional wisdom" (Zigler & Turner, 1982) which states that continuity is important, and that communication between staff and parents will enable this continuity. The empowerment of parents has raised questions concerning the relative power and status of both parents and staff.

Thus, the need for parent involvement in day care centers seems to be based more on the beliefs of many professionals that this is an important process, rather than on empirical findings. Honig (1975) claims that parent involvement is an antidote to professional arrogance. Yet, to some extent, professional arrogance has been behind the development of parent involement programs by professionals for parents. There have been no studies to date which carefully explore the perceptions of parents regarding the role of day care staff and the relationships between them. Furthermore, few perceptions of day care staff have been documented in the vast prescriptive literature which describes their role viz a viz the parents. It is the perceptions of these two groups - the key players, as well asthose of other stakeholders in the day care field, that should be explored in depth. This exploration could lead to a more feasible, and possible less arrogant, conception of the involvement of parents in day care and the relationship between staff and parents.

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